On 28 June 2016, Kazakhstan won a non-permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) after outvoting ASEAN-backed Thailand to represent the Asia-Pacific in the UN body. Kazakhstan will serve for a two-year term starting this year, along with non-permanent members Japan, Egypt, Ukraine, Uruguay, Senegal, Sweden, Bolivia, and Ethiopia – the latter three being newly elected non-permanent members – and permanent members US, China, Russia, France, and UK. Kazakhstan’s ascension to the UNSC significantly indicates Central Asia’s presence and relevance in the global stage. Arguably, Kazakhstan’s election is fitting: not only does it stand for the Muslim community’s interests and concerns before the most powerful UN agency, but is also symbolic of the effort to have greater and more diversified representation and perspectives in the global arena. While Kazakhstan may be a young country, it has shown that it can contribute to international peace and stability.

Kazakhstan: a bridge to many regions

A landlocked country, Kazakhstan is strategically located at the heart of Central Asia, which connects the regions of Europe and Asia. Its geo-strategic position enables it to engage with neighbors and at the same time maintain relations with offshore actors, consequently impacting regional and global power dynamics.

In particular, its partnerships with Russia, China, and the US indicate that Kazakhstan can act as a buffer state by virtue of its importance to these global powers. On the one hand, Kazakhstan shares historical, cultural, and linguistic links with Russia; bilateral relations, especially by way of economics, energy, labor, and migration, continue to be indispensable to Kazakhstan.1 Similarly, in its bilateral relations with China, Kazakhstan finds itself within the ambit of the latter’s “One Belt, One Road” policy, which seeks to rehabilitate the Silk Road to increase regional economic cooperation and investment.2 Kazakhstan’s abundance of energy resources and the traversal of Chinese oil and gas pipeline make the country indispensable to China’s economic activities. Kazakhstan-US ties stem from common nuclear disarmament efforts, joint oil exploration, and counterterrorism.

It is also worth mentioning that since its independence, Kazakhstan has made substantial contributions to the international community. It has provided humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan and continues to bolster rebuilding by, among other efforts, constructing schools and roads, and implementing educational programs for Afghans who grew up in war conditions. On the other hand, the disagreement between the West and Russia over Ukraine in 2013 was a litmus test of Kazakhstan’s capability as a mediator. Its involvement in Crimea boosted not only Kazakh sovereignty, but also allowed Kazakhstan to open multiple avenues for constructive engagement.

Kazakhstan and a nuclear-safe world

The nuclear-weapons issue is of critical importance warranting firm multilateral action. In many instances in recent history, the world came within reach of nuclear exchanges between nuclear-weapons states and witnessed the peril of nuclear accidents. This was shown by recent incidents such as the strong reaction to the shooting of Pakistani soldiers in the disputed Kashmir region by Pakistani Defense Minister Khawaja Asif, who threatened to use atomic weapons to “eliminate India”; and Pakistan’s threat of a nuclear war with Israel after being misled by spurious reports.4 The Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, meanwhile, placed greater doubts about the development of nuclear energy resources.

Thus, the need to prevent such incidents from happening in the future requires the prohibition or placement of nuclear power under strict and effective global control. This is an opportune moment for Kazakhstan to contribute to nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

Kazakhstan has demonstrated its significance as an elected non-permanent member of the UNSC and has gained legitimacy to compel other states to follow its disarmament lead. Concerned with the horrendous human cost of previous nuclear testing activities in its territory, Kazakhstan has espoused efforts to fortify the non-proliferation regime. For instance, it became party to
many weapons-related policies, among them the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Kazakhstan’s election in the UNSC highlights the global agenda-setting on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, which emanates from the country’s own experience – following the Soviet Union’s collapse in the 1990s, Kazakhstan inherited fissile materials and facilities, including the world’s largest weapons test site, Semipalatinsk, but has voluntarily relinquished these soon after declaring independence. With the US and international institutions providing economic access to strengthen its newfound sovereignty, Kazakhstan has come to envisage itself not only as a new nation but also as a responsible member of the global community.

As a UNSC member, Kazakhstan is also expected to be faithful to its commitment with the International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA) safety, security and safeguard standards, especially in the face of a greater security threat (e.g., terrorism) brought about by illegal possession of nuclear weapons. However, it should be said that Kazakhstan bestrides somewhat opposing concerns – it shares the view of developing countries on the nuclear-weapon states’ failure to act effectively toward nuclear disarmament, but also takes part in the global nuclear market. Given its abundant uranium supply and successful private energy industries, Kazakhstan supports the right to develop nuclear resources, albeit for peaceful use.

Sharing outlook, enhancing relations

The Philippines established diplomatic relations with Kazakhstan on 19 March 1992, but the bilateral relations, for the most part, remains largely limited and underdeveloped. For instance, in terms of trade, Philippine exports to Kazakhstan only amounted to USD 8.7 million from January to October 2015. In pursuit of alternative ways to further boost the Philippine economy and pursue an independent foreign policy under the Duterte administration, it may be pragmatic for the Philippines to deepen its ties with a resource-rich, nonaligned Kazakhstan.

The Philippines and Kazakhstan find common ground in balancing the maintenance of relations with the constructive engagement of multiple actors. Moreover, Kazakhstan’s successful experience in disarmament may also serve as a guide to achieve a nuclear-free Philippines, as well as to explore alternative energy resources. As the 2017 ASEAN Chair, the Philippines could break new ground in linking ASEAN with Kazakhstan and the rest of Central Asia, leading to greater understanding between and prospects for the two regions.

Endnotes:


